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Contesting neoliberalism in an ‘activist city’: working towards the urban commons in Berlin

Ross Beveridge and Matthias Naumann

Berlin enjoys a reputation as an ‘activist city’ and in many ways this is justified. This is a city with a long culture and history of political protest, a vibrant scene of DIY politics and grassroots organisations and, in recent years, numerous, often successful urban social movements.¹ It is also a city where the left have often been strong. During the 2000s the Left Party (*DIE LINKE*) governed for ten years in coalition with the Social Democrats (and was heavily criticised by social movements). Berlin is, then, undoubtedly a great place to observe the ways in which neoliberalism is contested at the urban scale. However, it is also a city in which the unfolding of globalisation and urban neoliberal policy is intense, in the aftermath of decades of disconnection from global capitalism. It is, then, also a great place to observe the ways in which neoliberalism becomes embedded in a context of relative contestation. Our concern here is to reflect on the dialectics at work in the city. We are not so much concerned with providing an assessment of success or failure as we are with, more constructively, examining what can be learnt from urban social movements in Berlin. Three points from the experiences of Berlin appear to be of general importance. First, that privatisation and depoliticisation of governance are (of course) not irreversible – even seemingly hopeless situations change quickly. Second, that the broad idea of a ‘Right to the City’, as popular as it has become, benefits from having a ‘material’ dimension, a clear focus on aspects of urban everyday life. And, third, that urban social movements and left parties must find ways to accommodate inevitable antagonisms and continue to collaborate with each other.

Repoliticisation and a return to public ownership are possible

After reunification and re-entry into the global economy, in the 1990s Berlin experienced systematic privatisation of infrastructure (gas, electricity and water), broader restructuring as a ‘global city’, and austerity politics in the face of rising city debts. During this period there was little sustained public opposition to privatisation. This began to change in the 2000s as a Red-Red (Social Democrat-Left Party) coalition (2002-2011) came to power. But even with the Left Party in power privatisation in some sectors (e.g. housing and state property) continued. This created discontent on the left and fed into a growth in urban social movements contesting globalisation and urban development.² It was during this period that infrastructure and public space become a focal point for diverse social movements in Berlin, with notions of a democratic rather than statist ‘public’ and the broad agenda of ‘Right to the City’ (RTC), transforming discourse around urban infrastructure.

The most visible result of this development has been the remunicipalisation of the partially privatised Berlin Water Company. The Berlin Senate (executive) bought back the shares from the private owners of the Water Company. There are further plans to establish in the near future a municipal energy and gas utility. Other campaigns around urban infrastructure issues include the successful referendum against the development of the former airport Tempelhof and the promotion of cycling infrastructure, as well as the unsuccessful protests against the extension of the inner city motorway (A100). All these initiatives illustrate that politicisation of urban infrastructure is possible through concerted action, and that one breakthrough success (in Berlin, reversing the privatisation of the water company) can help re-shape the political discourse, at least at the urban level.

Infrastructure and the Right to the City

While in legal terms remunicipalisation is the return to public ownership of privatised assets at the local and federal state level, in Germany it has led inevitably to political debate on alternatives to existing forms of urban governance, including those connected to broader debates on the 'Right to the City'.³ David Harvey (following Henri Lefebvre) has argued that the 'Right to the City' should be adopted as "both a working slogan and a political ideal" in the quest for an 'urban commons'.⁴ This big-picture politics is welcome and necessary, but experiences in Berlin attest to the need for, and benefits of, a range of strategic engagements. 'Right to the City', as it appears to be understood in practice, is about opening up political possibilities, about laying claim to the city in its manifold forms. This can on occasion mean that the definition of right(s) to the city is elusive, but this can also be positive, in that it reflects possibility and not lack of strategic intention.

Still, we would argue that the 'Right to the City' campaigns benefit from being more directly articulated in relation to everyday aspects of the urban life, such as public goods and services. Although it was never articulated as such in Berlin, there was, at least for a short period, something close to a campaign for a 'Right to Infrastructure' – one which was quite effective in mobilising a diversity of interests. The issue of infrastructure provided both a subject and object for 'Right to the City'. It allowed concrete demands (Reverse Privatisation!) to be made, rights to be expressed in relation to the urban fabric (affordable and ecological water and energy supply), and utopias (infrastructure as urban commons) to be advocated. It is the everyday material fabric of the city (its vast layers of infrastructure, public and private spaces, housing) that provides the key to mobilising people. It links basic needs to big politics. 'Right to the City', if well used in terms of holding together the specific (public parks) and the broad (the urban commons), may thus be crucial in reaching beyond the 'left niche' and achieving political change at and beyond the urban level.

Urban social movements can and must provide leadership

The relative success of Berlin's urban social movements is rooted in their ability to build broad coalitions beyond activist subcultures. A range of diverse forms of politics emerged from the campaigns; in some, different legal and political instruments were utilised (public referendums); in general they acted as a powerful corrective to the *Realpolitik* of political parties, even (and especially) of the left, through protest and public action. In Berlin (as well as in other cities across Germany) political parties across the political spectrum have become interested in public ownership as a means of increasing public revenue, controlling resources and becoming key players in the energy transition (*Energiewende*). Hence there is evident a less than progressive politics of remunicipalisation, one concerned with reasserting state power. Social movements in Berlin were crucial in maintaining pressure on the Left Party while it was in power, and they remain vital in pushing for genuinely progressive politics.

While antagonism has emerged, it must be seen as necessary, particularly in a context where the Left Party in power was to a certain extent hamstrung by the limits of formal politics, in this case through being a junior partner in coalition government with Social Democrats intent on Third Way (*Neue Mitte*) politics. In some ways, social movements performed the role of the left opposition party during this period. After a spell in opposition, during which the Left Party has actively supported social movements, it will be interesting to see whether productive antagonism can be maintained now that the party is back in coalition government with the Social Democrats and the Greens. Two leading figures in the campaign to remunicipalise energy infrastructure were elected in the city-level elections in September 2016- one for the Left Party, one for the Greens. Perhaps this points to a necessary exchange

of ideas and persons, one that might maintain the strategic interplay of formal and informal politics.

Conclusion: beyond the ‘activist city’, towards the urban commons

While the case of Berlin, and its variety of social movements, tells us much about the politicisation of urban infrastructure, the reversibility of neoliberal policy, the need to define urban commons within the ‘Right to the City’, and to develop broad coalitions, it is far from a clear success story. Neoliberal politics still persist in the city. The gentrification and touristification of many neighbourhoods have led to increasing rents. Furthermore, the commercialisation and privatisation of public goods is also continuing. The management of Berlin’s green space exemplifies this. Grün Berlin GmbH, fully owned by the city of Berlin, is responsible for the management of several large green spaces in Berlin that were formerly the responsibility of the municipal authorities (‘Bezirksämter’). However, Grün Berlin is a private legal entity and therefore not exposed to public scrutiny and control. And it is now increasingly seeking to transform public and free parks into pay-for exhibition and leisure zones.

Hence, although public goods and spaces may be areas in which the left can achieve broad public support, it remains a contested field, in which state ownership is not enough. Even in a city where political activism is strong, the fluctuations in the strength and number, as well as political salience of social movements are very apparent. The disintegration of some successful social movements (e.g. against the water company) suggests the perhaps inevitable conflict and fatigue that can appear within movements.

It also shows how quickly the political context can change. With most of the major political parties in Berlin now in favour of some form of public ownership, social movements have had to move swiftly from being anti-privatisation to offering viable alternatives to a return to ‘traditional’ public ownership. Further, neoliberal policy and logic continues to be implemented – it spills over into new sectors even while it is, in part, being reversed in others. This slippery, shape-shifting quality reveals the challenge of dealing with a discourse and policy paradigm that at times seems to have a power of its own. However, neoliberalism is, as we all know, enacted and implemented by people on the ground. Retaining this knowledge is vital to the means of resisting it: through people on the ground developing alternative ideas and discourses, organisations and campaigns.

What, if anything, might the left in the UK and elsewhere take from the Berlin experience? Urban social movements in Berlin and elsewhere have been at their strongest when they have been able to link the general and the particular: neoliberalism with particular policy decisions; the global with the urban; ‘Right to the City’ with water and energy infrastructure. This line of thinking seems the best antidote to fatalism and the potential fracturing of opposition. Social movements and political parties can collaborate, even in antagonistic relationships; and a narrative of political change rooted in, but reaching beyond, the everyday might offer the best way of achieving broader public support.

Notes

1. On the history of squatting in Berlin, for example, see Alexander Vasudevan’s *Metropolitan Preoccupations: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in Berlin*, Wiley-Blackwell 2015.
2. Andrej Holm (ed) *Reclaim Berlin! Soziale Kämpfe in der neoliberalen Stadt*, Assoziation A 2014.

3. See Sören Becker, Ross Beveridge & Matthias Naumann, 'Remunicipalization in German cities: contesting neo-liberalism and reimagining urban governance?', *Space and Polity* 19(1), 2015, 76-90.

4. Cited in Kafui A Attah, 'What kind of right is the right to the city?' *Progress in Human Geography* 35(5), 2011, p676.

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Towards commoning institutions in, against and beyond the 'Greek crisis' **Lazaros Karaliotas**

Since the outbreak of the so-called 'Greek Crisis', Greece has frequently attracted headlines in the mainstream media, as well as much political interest and academic analysis. The details of successive 'bailout agreements', the devastating implications of severe austerity measures, the rise of the Neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, the squares movement, the successive electoral wins of Syriza in 2015, the 'No' vote in the July 2015 referendum on the loan agreement proposed by the country's creditors, have captured the public gaze and generated major debates. But less attention has been paid to the everyday urban politics that are unfolding in the midst of the crisis.

Since the inspirational emergence of the squares movement during the summer of 2011, the urban fabric of Greece has been the crucible of a profusion of emancipatory political experiments revolving around alternative ways of collectively self-organising urban everyday life. I want to focus here on the possibilities that such experiments open up, as well as the challenges and limitations they face in 'articulating alternative publics' - to put it in the terms of the brief for this discussion.

Living the 'Greek crisis'

Six years of dogmatic neoliberal austerity measures, imposed by successive governments and by the European politico-economic elites, have left their mark on the Greek urban landscape. Statistical indicators are unable to convey the magnitude of the socio-economic collapse that has been experienced, or the terrible nature of the embodied experiences of loss and trauma that have been visited upon Greeks - and even more so on the immigrants living in the country. Between 2009 and 2014 real GDP shrank by 25.5 per cent, while 4 out of 10 citizens currently survive below the 2009 poverty-line.¹ Unemployment skyrocketed from 9.6 per cent in 2009 to 26.5 per cent in 2014, reaching the level of 1.3 million unemployed. Unsurprisingly, young people and women are worst hit, with rates climbing to 52.4 per cent and 30.2 per cent respectively.² And there has also been a series of privatisations, and the retraction of social and labour rights, which has led to worsening levels of precarity, particularly for immigrants, women and young people. Furthermore, recurring cuts in wages and pensions (at rates of between 35 per cent and 50 per cent), the axing of welfare spending in areas like education and health, and the introduction of numerous emergency taxes has led to a sharp increase in the relative cost of urban life, and to widespread experiences of vulnerability and precarity.

At the same time, an authoritarian turn has marked the country's political life after 2010. Formal democratic procedures were been repeatedly bypassed in the name of emergency and economic necessity, and many political mobilisations, including the squares movement, were met with police brutality. And this turn at the institutional level was accompanied by the resurgence, and sometimes temporary hegemony, of racist and exclusionary discourses in the public sphere.³ Such discourses were many times translated into violent attacks against immigrants, both by the Neo-Nazis of Golden Dawn and the police.

The thousands of homeless people struggling for survival in the streets of Athens and Thessaloniki and the violent attacks against immigrants are the two most visible symptoms of a bio-political regime that has inflicted multiple vulnerabilities and striven to foreclose the spaces for democratic disagreement and creativity.

From the squares to the urban fabric

At the same time this regime has again and again been confronted by emancipatory political events and experiments. The squares movement is the most well-known of these. Indeed, the squares movement was unprecedented in the country's political history since 1974 and the downfall of the military Junta. Between May and July 2011, a multitude of protesters from widely varying socio-economic backgrounds and politico-ideological outlooks - often even conflicting - occupied Syntagma square in Athens and many other squares across the country, to express their disagreement with the state of the country. The movement represented a peak in the struggle against austerity, and undeniably contributed to the thorough de-legitimisation of the up-to-then ruling parties of social-democratic PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) and conservative ND (New Democracy). As Marina Prentoulis recently argued in the pages of *Soundings*, it also played a key role in the sharp increase in Syriza's electoral influence leading to its twin electoral wins in 2015.⁴

More importantly, the squares movement was also, despite internal splits and tensions, a performative critique of existing liberal-democratic institutions, and was articulated around new modes of saying, being and doing in-common. Protesters in the squares reclaimed urban public spaces from their allotted role in the neoliberal and post-democratic order to open up new political spaces and co-produce spaces in-common. In Syntagma, a whole other scene of collective self-organisation was assembled to maintain and support the movement: a Popular Assembly as a direct democratic space for discussions and decision-making; a media centre and a radio station; a neighbourhood organisation centre that co-ordinated similar activities in various parts of the city; a makeshift camp for the protesters sleeping in the square; stations covering the protesters' daily needs and extending their solidarity to vulnerable urban dwellers by offering food and clothing; a first-aid station; a performing arts centre; and a number of thematic groups. And it is in these very spaces that protesters also started to explore ways to spread the movement into popular urban neighbourhoods, workplaces and other key sites of the city. The aim was nothing less than to put in place an alternative network of organising urban everyday life. As a result, when the mobilisation gradually petered out, in the face of repeated brutal attacks by the police, the movement did not dissolve but was instead transformed into a series of experiments throughout the urban fabric.

The squares movement inspired and fuelled the ongoing efforts to create new forms of self-organisation and self-management of urban life. A wide range of experiments of this kind are proliferating in its aftermath: social solidarity health clinics and pharmacies as well as solidarity support networks for the homeless, immigrants and refugees; workplace occupations, work collectives and self-management efforts by workers; social groceries,

social currencies, time-sharing banks and cooperative networks that bypass ‘middlemen’ in the distribution of products; as well as social centres and housing squats. This incipient network of emancipatory socio-spatial experiments draws its inspiration from the practices explored in the squares and aspires to a new mode of urban life articulated around equality and collective self-governance. What is more, these initiatives are also filling their ranks with a new generation of activists who were brought together through the politicised solidarity that was forged in and through the squares. Interestingly enough, similar (albeit historically and geographically differentiated) experiments are proliferating in the aftermath of the outbreak of the 2008 crisis and the concomitant eruption of urban uprisings across the globe. What, then, are the political potentialities that such experiments open up, and what challenges and limitations do they face?

Towards commoning institutions?

As a starting point for exploring this question it is important to stress that these experiments are doing more than weaving a safety-net against the implications of austerity: they represent an embodied and ongoing exploration of alternative ways of organising urban life. They reflect the desire to create something durable, something that could move beyond spectacular (urban) uprisings and single-issue-based struggles. They effectively ask, in Massimo de Angelis’ phrase: ‘how do we move from movement to society?’⁵ In their effort to spread out to the urban fabric such experiments put forward an alternative political imaginary around institution-building; around what the (urban) public might be and how to (self-)organise it.

This imaginary foregrounds practices of commoning in the face of the withdrawal of public resources and increasing vulnerabilities. And here the common and commoning have a twofold meaning: on the one hand, commoning practices affirm people’s right to use the commons as resources to fulfil their basic needs and live their everyday lives; on the other, precisely through these practices, the common also becomes a field wherein new forms of (urban) life are generated through multiplicity and difference.⁶ The incipient commoning institutions that are emerging throughout the Greek urban landscape are re-imagining the urban as a common field. They struggle to protect the commons of urban space, culture, information, education and health care provision from privatisation and enclosure. More importantly, their everyday practices collectively produce alternative urban publics against and beyond the logics of the market and the state. In this sense, they can also be perceived of as ‘institutions of commoning’.⁷

However I do not want to romanticise these experiments, or urban commoning as a political strategy. Building, sustaining and expanding commoning institutions are not without their challenges and limitations. I want to briefly touch upon three interrelated challenges for the articulating of alternative publics.

Firstly, a key question is that of the way in which the community of commoning (or the public) is construed. Reclaiming the commons from their allocation in the neoliberal and post-democratic order does not necessarily lead to emancipatory politics. New forms of enclosure and different exclusionary lines might be (re-)produced if the common is identified with any particular and closed community. In order to fuel emancipatory politics through sharing and encounters, emerging commoning institutions need to make every effort to be open to ‘newcomers’: to allow new subjects, voices, concerns and ideas to surface.⁸ In practice, of course, ideological rigidities and spatial, temporal and financial constraints always place limits on who can participate in commoning practices, and this has an impact on their openness.

Secondly - and this too is related to the issue of openness - there is a further challenge in moving beyond the confines of self-enclosed experiments. Whilst the formulation of a network of solidarity initiatives across Greece has been one of the most promising developments over the past five years, these links are still fragmented and fragile, as the majority of commoning experiments remain largely confined within their particular agendas, practices and understandings. Such links are even more fragile, although certainly present, when it comes to the relations between Greek experiments and similar practices outside Greece in Europe and beyond.

Finally, perhaps the most important challenge for commoning institutions, as it has emerged from the Greek experience, is that of the power relations within which they are embedded. From the squares movement onwards, a number of commoning experiments - including the occupation and self-management of the country's Public Broadcasting Service (ERT) in Athens, social centres, anarchist squats and more recently refugee housing squats - have been evicted by the police from their operating spaces. Participants have resisted these evictions, but they were not unexpected, and were seen as inevitable problem. Syriza's electoral victories subsequently introduced an interesting twist to the question of relations between commoning experiments and the state. ERT, for example - which operated as a self-managed TV and radio station after 2013, when the New Democracy government shut down the service and fired all of its 2700 workers - re-opened as a public institution after Syriza's electoral victory. And a number of co-operatives and solidarity initiatives that were already set up are now becoming part of the state's strategy for ameliorating the consequences of the crisis. While not a problem in itself, this risks reducing solidarity initiatives to instances in the micro-management of social problems and fragmented communities.

These challenges and limitations should not, however, be read as reasons to dismiss the emancipatory potential of commoning institutions. Although always faced with tensions and challenges, commoning institutions are imperfect but nevertheless important experiments in moving beyond simple resistance to increasing exploitation and vulnerability whilst articulating alternative political imaginaries and forms of organisation. The astonishing network of grassroots solidarity with refugees and migrants currently unfolding from the Greek islands through urban centres to the borders and throughout Europe is a case in point. Its role in supporting migrants and refugees, its multi-faceted entanglements and tensions with the state at various scales, as well as its internal limitations and contradictions, attest to the importance of such practices; and they also encapsulate many of the questions that I have raised above, and also pose important new ones. How to better respond from an emancipatory perspective, of course, remains an open question. But it would definitely require: daring imagination, rigorous organisational innovation and a commitment to the inherently open logic of equality.

Notes

1. Institute of Labor-GSEE, *Annual Economic Outlook 2015: The Greek economy and employment*, INE-GSEE 2015.
2. Eurostat Database: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>. See also Dina Vaiou, 'Tracing aspects of the Greek crisis in Athens: Putting women in the picture', *European Urban and Regional Studies*, for an illuminating account of the gendered implications of the 'Greek crisis'
3. Indicative in this respect is the publication of the pictures of AIDS-HIV positive sex-workers and their vilifications as a 'hygiene bomb against Greek families' by the then

Minister of Health Andreas Loverdos, and their subsequent castigation by the mainstream media. The documentary *Ruins*, directed by Zoe Mavroudi, tells the story of this witch-hunt: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlbL4sQ3_Fo.

4. Marina Prentoulis 'From the EU to Latin America: left populism and regional integration', *Soundings*, 63, 2016

5. M.de Angelis and S. Stavrides, 'On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides', *An Architektur*, 23, 2010.

6. Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Commonwealth*, Harvard University Press 2009; Alex Jeffrey, Colin McFarlane and Alex Vasudevan, 'Rethinking enclosure: space, subjectivity and the commons', *Antipode*, 44.4, 2012 .

7. Gigi Roggero 'Five theses on the common', *Rethinking Marxism*, 22.3.10.

8. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On politics and aesthetics*, Continuum 2010.

Experimenting with institutions

Angela Last

The word 'institution' tends to attract at best a conditional appreciation and at worst a complete aversion. The aversion is usually triggered by some form of exposure to institutional violence through bureaucracy or enforcement of undesirable norms; while a conditional appreciation usually stems from a general welcoming of institutional safety nets combined with an awareness of their potentially oppressive downsides. In their Kilburn Manifesto contribution 'States of Imagination', Janet Newman and John Clarke describe a similar relationship between people and the state: the state is both loathed and desired under current political conditions, since it has the capacity to function both as a tool of neoliberal policies and as a 'bulwark' against them.¹ As more and more institutions of the welfare state, including the National Health Service, are being dismantled, the question of 'what kinds of institutions do we actually want?' has become more urgent. Do we want to protect the institutions we already have, which we need but feel ambiguous about, or are there better alternatives?

At present, increasingly large sections of the populations of Europe and North America are seeing a withdrawal of institutional support in the areas of healthcare, social security and education. The cuts in social services have been so severe - causing displacement, hunger and death - that many have been speaking of a 'war on citizens' or 'citizen sacrifice'.² To counteract the current measures, people in a number of different countries have started to set up their own alternative 'institutions' to produce more equitable access to basic provision such as housing, healthcare, education. Examples include the Greek social hospitals (see Lazaros Karaliotas in this roundtable), the Rolling Jubilee debtors network and Detroit Water Brigade in the USA, and informal refugee camps in various countries. These projects could be described as 'experimental', 'informal' or 'parallel' institutions.

Such institutions are, of course, not a new phenomenon. They emerge whenever vital institutions are failing or perceived as failing. Due to their greater vulnerability, it is usually the poorer sections of the population that are forced to bring these institutions into existence. At present, they are commonly associated with the 'permanent austerity' of the Global South, where they tend to be theorised as 'informal institutions'. In the Global North, they tend to appear as 'experimental' or 'parallel' institutions - depending on the level of paranoia that is associated with them: 'experimental institutions' are generally more welcomed (and funded) than 'parallel institutions', which are more often than not the product of urgency and frequently seen as a threat to the state. Parallel institutions also have negative associations

because of the notorious ‘parallel institutions’ of extreme right-wing groups such as the National Socialists, BNP or Golden Dawn, which are explicitly intended to displace existing forms of governance; and they are also associated with terror organisations or mafias, where they may have started off with benevolent or protective aims.³

Although they can be poorly run, usually because of lack of funds or time, many such institutions have been outperforming state and NGO-run alternatives, though on a much lower budget and with less experience, and at the same time developing new systems of institutional governance. Better known examples include the informal institutions in Latin America in the 1990s, after externally imposed ‘structural reforms’ left countries with large sections of disenfranchised populations; and various African American experiments, including the Black Hospital Movement, the Black Panther institutions, and a number of longstanding co-operatives.⁴ Because of their potential for subversion, their relations with the state encompass a spectrum from violent opposition to a celebratory inclusion of ‘institutional innovation’ (not necessarily in proportion to their threat or innovation level).

The reaction of ferocity or euphoria with which some of these initiatives have been met prompts the following questions: what possibilities and imaginaries do and can these ‘institutions’ represent? What outcomes would they enable at the end of a trajectory free of opposition? And what are the effects of a continual encounter with state violence? And there is also the question about why we call such efforts ‘institutions’. Would ‘social movement’, ‘informal organisation’ or ‘civic experiment’ not do? What do institutions do differently, and what kind of solidarities can they facilitate or sustain?

While it is impossible to answer these questions in this short contribution, I would like to offer some thoughts on how the current responses to austerity and neoliberalism function as political provocations. I will use the term ‘parallel institution’ to stand for attempts to duplicate, but also rethink, existing, but vanishing institutional support.

1. More than self-help or safety-net building, parallel institutions are devised as critiques, solutions, visions, most often from below. They constitute experiments in commoning against withdrawal and/or averse concentration of resources, and against the systematic production of populations regarded as superfluous humanity - and the degradation of humans and nonhumans alike. Thus they become a valuable site for the creation of new imaginaries, including in terms of their possible long-term implementation. As Lazaros Karaliotas also notes, Massimo de Angelis has described the dynamic of such institutions as addressing the question of ‘how do we move from movement to society?’⁵ Parallel institutions reflect the desire to create something more durable, beyond mere issue formation.

2. In addition, parallel institutions constitute places of mutual learning about one another’s perspectives and needs, and give a sense of individual and collective power vis-à-vis the state. They render visible the struggle that surrounds the emergence of any form of institution. With this, they also raise questions about possibilities for experimentation within established institutions. Since it has been pointed out that all institutions are experiments, and all of neoliberalism is an experiment, how can parallel institutions prompt a different sort of experimentation? Could it be in the form of vigilance about experimental trajectories? What other types of constructive traffic could ensue?

3. Parallel institutions raise questions not only about the national distribution of resources, but also about resource distribution at the global scale. These are connected to critiques of

‘informality’ as a marker of lack of development, or portrayed as a phenomenon located primarily in the ‘global South’.⁶ In many ‘developed’ countries, activists are looking towards the so-called ‘underdeveloped’ countries for better models of community, economics and governance. In Detroit, African American activists are exploring African models of community; in London, people are looking towards Latin America. Likewise, formerly privileged communities, including the middle classes, are now looking towards persistently underprivileged communities for coping strategies and inspiration. While current realisations about similarities have not erased differences over night, they may have created an opening for rethinking apparently entrenched global divisions. How do we want to interact with one another globally? How does development relate to human development? Can new forms of globalisation ensue from new-found transnational solidarities?

4. Parallel institutions can find themselves in a paradoxical position: on the one hand they represent the ideal of neoliberal governance in that they micro-manage social problems; on the other, they emerge out of a refusal to sacrifice the commons. This double-edged position echoes past critiques of welfare institutions as protecting from capitalist excesses while also functioning as ‘band aids’ enabling an easy maintenance of inequalities. How are parallel institutions going to negotiate these poles, especially when offered integration into the current system through funding or adoption of their methods? Will they be forever caught between a parallel existence that leaves dysfunctional state institutions intact and a state opposition that makes their existence impossible or corruptible?

In some sense, parallel institutions appear to be the embodiment of a response to Jacques Rancière’s call to replace the question ‘How are we to face a political problem?’ with that of ‘How are we to reinvent politics?’.⁷ It could be that their potential for reinvention may come from finding alternative ways of negotiating the tension between the desire for security and the desire for greater agency. Their question could be translated as: ‘How to create stability, while at the same time engaging in constructive destabilisation?’

Many parallel institutions have grown out of an urgent need to provide for fellow human beings; and their efforts could be seen as affirming a vote of no confidence in neoliberal governance, and helping to dismantle the illusion of governmental stability. As well as highlighting governments’ failure to respond to citizens’ needs during a short-term crisis, and perhaps more importantly, parallel institutions embody a critique of neoliberalism’s (and capitalism’s) short-term trajectories. Although always having to negotiate accusations of conservatism, parallel institutions tend to be less about fixity than about the long-term management of human vulnerability. It is this temporal disjuncture that is important in thinking beyond neoliberalism - and it also has relevance beyond the human: we are tied up with abrupt and long-term environmental changes, from species extinction to climate change.

Past and present examples of experimental institutions seem to tell us that a change of governmental practices is extremely difficult, but not impossible. But they also tell us that ordinary people, no matter where and in what circumstances, can get together and not only change their own situation, but also have an impact way beyond their temporal or geographical boundaries. More than ever it is important to continue institutional counter-experiments ...

Notes

1. Janet Newman and John Clarke, ‘States of Imagination’, *Soundings* 56 Summer 2014.

2. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books 2015.
3. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich 1973.
4. Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*, University of Minnesota Press 2013.
5. Massimo De Angelis, 'On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides by An Architektur', *E-Flux* June 2010.
6. Ann Varley, 'Postcolonialising informality?', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2013.
7. Jacques Rancière 'Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization', *October* Summer 1992.

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